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DOSTOIEVSKY

BY W. B. TRITES

THE Slav peril has been much talked about of late. Now the Slav peril means, if it means anything, Russian thought; and Russian thought, as it reveals itself in Russian literature and Russian dancing, seems to me the most splendid and most desirable thought in the world to-day.

Take Russian dancing. The dancing of France and England and Germany and America is negligible; but the Russian Ballet—the Russian Ballet, led by Nijinsky—is so profoundly beautiful that it has lifted dancing up to the plane whereon stand tragedy and sculpture.

As Nijinsky leads the world's dancers, so the world's novelists are led by Dostoevsky, Gogol, Tolstoi and Turgeneff. *Crime and Punishment*, *Dead Souls*, *War and Peace* and *Fathers and Sons* are to the novels of the rest of the world as, I might almost say, the Russian Ballet is to a cakewalk.

Dostoevsky, the greatest of the Russian novelists, is also to-day the most discussed one. Dostoevsky has had of late a singular revival. It is his striking "modernity" (modernity is the supreme test of art, since only the truth remains always modern) which has brought about this revival. Dostoevsky is said to have been influenced by Dickens, and occasionally, indeed, I seem to detect a Dickens touch in him; but how old-fashioned Dickens seems to-day, while how modern seems Dostoevsky! Dostoevsky seems, indeed, as modern as Dr. Johnson in his *Life of Savage*, that large, profound, and tender study in psychology which might have been written yesterday, if anybody had been alive yesterday capable of writing it.

I desire to consider Dostoevsky from one angle alone—the angle, namely, of the dish rag. *The angle of the dish*

rag: to interpret that phrase, let me quote the following passage from *The Double*:

He must not suffer them to insult him, to trample him under foot like a dish rag. As a matter of fact, if some one really attempted to make a dish rag of Mr. Goliadkine, the attempt would, perhaps, succeed without difficulty and without danger (Mr. Goliadkine often admitted it himself). He would then become a dish rag; he would no longer be Mr. Goliadkine, but a foul dish rag, not a commonplace dish rag, however, but an aspiring one; a dish rag with fine feelings; fine feelings concealed deep within his wet folds, but fine feelings all the same.

Dostoevsky shows us—to speak fantastically—the souls of dish rags. He lets us hear the lamentations of the lowest, the vilest, the most shameless. From the mud the drunkard speaks. The coward speaks from his black skulking-place. Thieves speak, and the murderers of old women; harlots speak, and men who live on harlots' gains. And lo, all those voices are beautiful. They are sad and beautiful. All those ruined souls are like you and me. Like you and me, they love virtue. Like you and me, they loathe vice. And they mourn, down there in the morass, they mourn their incredible fall as you and I would mourn if, by some incredible mischance, we ourselves fell.

Dostoevsky reveals the soul of the lowly and the degraded. That is his essence. That is the one thing which he alone can do. The souls of our great picturesque, grandiose sinners have been revealed to us, lamenting in their jewelled robes, their marble palaces, from time immemorial. But the soul of the drunkard kept in drink by his harlot daughter: the soul of the elderly coward pawnbroker whose girl-wife kills herself rather than endure his petty cruelties: it is Dostoevsky alone who reveals the terrible beauty of these.

But assertion is nothing without proof. Let me, then, try, by means of a truncated and weak paraphrase of Dostoevsky's most famous passage, to prove that he can take these degraded beings and show us that they have souls, souls shimmering with beauty and splendor.

If ever there was a degraded soul it was Marmeladoff—and it is the famous Marmeladoff passage in *Crime and Punishment* that I am going to paraphrase. Raskolnikoff, the young student, enters a vile drinking-bar. There, as he quaffs his beer, a ragged, half-drunken, but educated

stranger of fifty or more begins to talk to him. This is Marmeladoff. And whilst Marmeladoff, half-drunk, sips his vodka and talks, the landlord and the boozers in the filthy bar listen, laugh, and interrupt:

“ I am a swine; but she—she is a lady. On me the mark of the beast; but Catherine Ivanovna, my wife, is a person of refinement, the daughter of an official. I admit that I am a rogue, but my wife has a liberal mind, fine feelings, and an education. And yet—oh, if she would pity me! . . . But Catherine Ivanovna, notwithstanding the grandeur of her soul, is unjust. Not once has she ever shown me pity. But—that is my character; I am a brute.”

“ We live in a cold room; this winter she took a chill; she coughs and spits blood. When I married her, she was a widow with three little children. Her first husband was an infantry officer, with whom she had eloped. She adored him, but he gambled, fell foul of the law, and died. Towards the end he beat her. . . .

“ Her husband’s death left her alone with those three young children in a wild and desolate district. It was there I met her. I have not the heart to describe her destitution. . . . And, young man, I, a widower, with a fourteen-year-old daughter, offered my hand to the poor woman because her suffering grieved my heart. She accepted my proposal, weeping, sobbing, and wringing her hands; but she accepted it, for she had nowhere to go. . . .

“ During a full year I did my duty honestly. But I lost my place through no fault of my own. It was then that I began to drink. . . . I have no idea how we live or how we pay our way.

“ And meanwhile my daughter was growing up. As to what her stepmother made her suffer, well, I prefer to pass over that in silence. And now, young man, in all sincerity, do you believe that a young girl, poor but honest, can really earn her living? If she has no special ability, she may make fifteen kopecks a day, though even that—And the children are dying of hunger. Catherine Ivanovna walks the room and wrings her hands. ‘ Lazybones,’ she says to my daughter, ‘ aren’t you ashamed to live on here in idleness?’ I was lying down at the time—come, out with the truth, I was drunk. . . . It was then past five o’clock; I saw Sonia rise, put on her hat, and go out.

“ At eight o’clock she returns. She goes straight to Catherine Ivanovna, and silently, without uttering a single word, she places thirty silver roubles on the table before my wife. Then she takes our large green handkerchief (it is a handkerchief that does duty for all the family), and she wraps her head in it, and she lies down on the bed, her face turned to the wall; but her shoulders and her body shook with a continual tremor. (As for me, I was still in the same condition.) And at that moment, young man, I saw Catherine Ivan-

ovna, she also in silence, go and kneel beside Sonetchka's little bed. She spent all the evening there on her knees, kissing my daughter's feet and refusing to rise. Afterward they both fell asleep together, in one another's arms—both together—both together—yes—and I—I was still there, overcome with drunkenness. . . .

"Who, then, will have pity on a man like me? Can you, sir, pity me now? . . . Why pity me, you ask? It is true; there is no reason. They ought to crucify me; put me on the cross, and not pity me! . . . But He who had pity on all mankind, He who understood all, He will pity us; He is the only judge. He will come on the last day, and He will ask, 'Where is the girl who sacrificed herself for a hateful and consumptive stepmother, for children who were not her brothers? Where is the girl who pities her earthly father and did not turn away in horror from the vicious drunkard?' And He will say, 'Come, I have already forgiven thee once. Now, again, thy sins are remitted thee because thou hast greatly loved.' All will be judged by Him, and He will forgive all, the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish. And when He has done with the others, then it will be our turn. 'Come unto me, ye, also,' He will say. 'Come unto me, drunkards; come unto me, cowards; come unto me, ye lewd!' And we will all approach without fear. And He will say, 'Ye are swine. Ye bear the mark of the beast. But, nevertheless, come.' And the sage, the intelligent, will say, 'Lord, why dost thou receive them?' And He will answer, 'I receive them, O ye sage; I receive them, O ye intelligent, because not one of them believes himself worthy of my favor.' And he will hold out his arms to us, and we will run to Him, and we will burst into tears—and we will understand all. Yes, all then will be understood by everybody. And Catherine Ivanovna, she, too, will understand. Lord, thy Kingdom come! "

That is the most famous passage in Dostoevsky. Whenever you discuss Dostoevsky with a Russian, he will ask eagerly, "Do you remember the Marmeladoff passage in *Crime and Punishment*?" You nod. Then he asks in what language you read the passage. But whether you reply that you read it in English or in French or in German, he will say sadly, "Ah, but it's only in Russian that it can really be appreciated." And that is my apology for the paraphrase I have given, a paraphrase wherefrom much has been omitted. Yet, perhaps, for all the omissions, for all my clumsy paraphrasing, the reader will grasp something of the beauty of this wonderful passage. What notes of horrible and heart-breaking splendor Dostoevsky strikes from the soul of Marmeladoff!

Marmeladoff would not appeal to the conventional reader.

He has not even youth—youth with its promise of reform—to recommend him. No, he is past fifty. A drunkard, he lies at home sleeping off his drunkenness; then he snatches up a pair of his wife's stockings and steals forth again. Or he goes to his daughter, the harlot, for drink money. In fact, the half-bottle that he consumes while conversing with Ras-kolnikoff was bought with his daughter's last thirty kopecks. No, Marmeladoff would not recommend himself to the general. He is a dish rag, nothing more; and yet—he feels his degradation as I would feel if, in my later years, by some unhappy chance, such degradation fell on me.

The novel of *Crime and Punishment* is itself an exposition of the motive which I have propounded as Dostoevsky's essence. This long and superb novel concerns a murder. An old woman money-lender and her sister are murdered by a young man for purposes of robbery. And what a murder it is! None of the blood, none of the horror, is spared us. None of the pathos is spared us, either. How pathetic this vivid picture of the sister: "The young man launched himself upon her, the hatchet upraised; and the unhappy woman's lips assumed the plaintive expression which one sees in very little children when they begin to be afraid of something, look fixedly at the object that frightens them, and are on the point of bursting into tears." The police take up the case. The murderer is finally captured. And that, crudely, is the plot of *Crime and Punishment*. What would our modern novelists do with such a plot? They would not touch it. They would turn up their noses at it. It would be too low and vulgar for them. Sir Conan Doyle alone might consider it; he might make of it a conventional detective tale. Dostoevsky, however, describing the murder in the beginning of the story, then describing the work of the detectives as the cringing murderer follows it step by step, obtains a strange, new horror such as the conventional detective story neither gives nor seeks to give. But it is not this strange, new horror which makes *Crime and Punishment* immortal. No: it is the fact that the thief, the murderer of two old women, reveals his soul to us, and his soul is like Goliadkine's and Marmeladoff's, and yours and mine.

Krotkaia is Dostoevsky's most beautiful short story. It is a story about an officer, turned out of the army for cowardice, who, after years of poverty and ignominy, opens a little pawnshop and prospers. To him, to this elderly, taciturn

pawnbroker, a beautiful young girl of sixteen comes one day to pawn a worthless silver brooch. She is alone and destitute. She is seeking a place as governess. The pawnbroker makes her several advances—advances in both meanings of the word. He follows her advertisements in the newspaper as they grow from day to day more desperate. On her final visit he asks her to marry him. In her childish helplessness she consents.

This story is strangely composed. It is in the form of a soliloquy, the soliloquy of the pawnbroker, pacing the floor, distracted with grief, while on a table in her coffin lies the corpse of Krotkaia, the girl-wife, who had leapt from a high window to seek in death escape from her unhappy marriage.

The elderly pawnbroker is well done. His cruelty to Krotkaia is a conscientious cruelty, intended for the girl's own good—no doubt innumerable girls have undergone this sort of conscientious cruelty at the hands of elderly husbands. Yes, the pawnbroker is well done; but Krotkaia! She is a masterpiece indeed.

To paint a young girl the brush must be dipped in mystery, in dew, in morning haze: but, above all, in mystery. Ibsen at sixty-five, after his strange love affair with the seventeen-year-old "Princess of Orangia," painted a young girl well in Hilda Wangel. All the mystery is there. And in Krotkaia, too, all the mystery is there. But Dostoevsky had to have two trials at Krotkaia. There are two versions of this story. The first version, in *A Writer's Journal*, is much the longer, and in it the girl-wife is analyzed to the core. She lives, to be sure. But the mystery, the lovely dawn mystery, is absent. Hence the picture is not a success.

Dostoevsky came back to Krotkaia again. He cut out the analysis of the girl-wife. He made her beautiful, silent and mysterious. The result is perfection. Krotkaia and Hilda Wangel are more truly, vividly alive than any two girls walking with shining eyes and soft laughter down the street.

The Karamazov Brothers is another novel full of degraded souls. The subtlest touch in it seems to me to be the episode of the Pole. Grouchenka, the beautiful Grouchenka, had been seduced in her girlhood by a Pole, and now, after some six or seven years, he is coming back to her. He had appeared, to her unsophisticated girl's eyes, noble and dis-

tinguished; she believes that she still loves him; she is even, in her prosperity, prepared to marry him. But the Pole turns out to be a vulgar sharper. He has come back, he and his accomplice, only to get hold of Grouchenka's money. How well the Pole is drawn!—his silly and stupid imitation of a landed proprietor, the solemn stubbornness that he puts into his transparent lies, his stupid, hopeless pluck when he is caught cheating at cards. And then, when Grouchenka repulses him, he tries to borrow money from her. "He began by demanding haughtily two thousand roubles for a very short term. No answer came, but he was not discouraged, and his letters followed one after another, always haughty, but little by little the sum required grew less. He descended to a hundred roubles, to twenty-five, to ten. Finally, Grouchenka received a supplication wherein the two Poles implored of her a single rouble for the pair of them." That touch—the two haughty adventurers fallen so low that they ask for one little rouble to share between them—that subtle touch of pathos achieves the effect which Dostoievsky always tries for and seldom misses—the effect of friendship, nay, of brotherhood, between his characters and ourselves. Dostoievsky has never drawn a character, no matter how degraded, how shameless, but the reader must say of him, "He is my brother."

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